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## The Ideal—One Possibility for the Future of Religious Identity

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## ‡ THE IDEAL—ONE POSSIBILITY FOR THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY ‡

Scholars in the area of religious studies face a conspicuous challenge if and when they desire to employ the concept of identity: Given the overabundance of theories and the notorious difficulties in articulating a consistently acceptable definition, is identity still relevant for the nature and scope of contemporary research on religious phenomena? In *Religion, Identity, and Change*, anthropologists Simon Coleman and Peter Collins inadvertently, yet incisively, encapsulate the dilemma. They show that each identity theory fits into one of two classifications: primordial or situationalist.<sup>1</sup> The former is essentially the view of identity that suggests historical continuity. On the other hand, those theories of identity labeled situationalist often make antithetical statements about societies and human nature, emphasizing the inconsistency of identity and the tendency for certain personas to emerge out of specific scenarios. In other words, observing and analyzing identities requires recognition of the situations that engender them.

If these two types are understood broadly—allowing the primordial to include any identity theory or definition for which continuity is central, and situationalist theories being those founded on the premise that identity is contextually contingent—many of the most popular theories, both old and new, find their place. Taken in turn, each category illuminates one pole on the spectrum that extends between assumption and observation, what is thought to be true and what is seen to be true. Perhaps this does not constitute an irresolvable impasse, however. If religious identity is understood to be an ideal, a latent possibility rather than a realized actuality, we may be closer to bridging the chasm between the primordial and the situational.

### The Primordial

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Coleman and Peter Collins, eds. *Religion, Identity, and Change: Perspectives on Global Transformations* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 4.

The primordial view of identity may entail continuity between community and individual, past and present, et cetera. Often this is the sort of identity intended by those pushing for recognition of a certain ethnicity or nationality; uniformity/homogeneity is paramount. Yet, this category also encompasses many of the most popular ideas from religious studies' past. In 1965, for instance, the sociologist Robert Bellah suggested,

...the central function of a religion is to act as a cultural gyroscope, to provide a stable set of definitions of the world and, correlatively, of the self...It is this stability, continuity, and coherence provided by commitment to a set of religious symbols (or perhaps better to what they symbolize) that give religion such a prominent place in defining the identity of a group or person. Identity is a statement of what a person or a group is essentially and, as it were, permanently.<sup>2</sup>

During the 1960s and 70s, scholars of religion began to address the relationship of the individual to his or her religion. One of the underlying assumptions, of course, was that humans strive for stability. Thus, Bellah adds that "identity does not change except under very severe pressure."<sup>3</sup> Orrin Klapp, Bellah's contemporary, addresses this same drive for consistency in *Collective Search for Identity*:

[Identity is] a functioning system of three variables: 1) what a person thinks about himself introspectively, 2) what he projects or sees imaged or accepted in the eyes of others (his social identity); and 3) his feelings validated when "real to me" and when shared with others.<sup>4</sup>

Here, identity is conceived as the overlap of these three components. Continuity is assumed, this time imagined as the nucleus of a Venn diagram where the three constituent circles are labeled: self-definition, social identity, and emotional concord between self and others.

It is significant to note that definitions of identity similar to Klapp's persist in religious studies. Social anthropologist and theologian Douglas Davies only recently defined identity as "the intersection point of self-understanding, of the views others have of us, and of a society's preferred values and associated emotions."<sup>5</sup> In this sense, identity is the product of personal negotiations with society, but the

<sup>2</sup> Robert Bellah, ed. *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), 173.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Orrin E. Klapp, *Collective Search for Identity* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 39.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas J. Davies, *Emotion, Identity, and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

emphasis remains on the success of such negotiations rather than the interminable discord caused by changing circumstances.

### The Situational

Social psychologist Steven Hitlin poignantly summarizes the situationalist position: “Decades of social psychological research can be boiled down to one insight: if we want to predict someone’s behavior, we are better off knowing where they are rather than who they are.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, sociologist Sheldon Stryker incorporates similar conclusions into his concept of identity salience: “Identity salience is defined as the probability that identity will be invoked across a variety of situations, or alternatively across persons in a given situation.”<sup>7</sup> The resounding consensus is that “persons have as many identities as distinct networks of relationships in which they occupy positions and play roles” (Stryker et al. 2000: 286).<sup>8</sup> For sociologist Mark Chaves, this directly affects the scientific study of religion. His recent comments on the religious congruence fallacy explain why. Chaves defines religious congruence as “consistency among an individual’s religious beliefs and attitudes, consistency between religious ideas and behavior, and religious ideas, identities, or schemas that are chronically salient and accessible to individuals across contexts and situations.”<sup>9</sup> Scholars commit a fallacy, then, when they ignore the ubiquity of incongruence and mistakenly “connect religiosity to what look like logically related outcomes.”<sup>10</sup> After all, “striving for congruence is not an essential feature of religion—unless we declare it such by definition.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Steven Hitlin, *Moral Selves, Evil Selves: The Social Psychology of Conscience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 93.

<sup>7</sup> Sheldon Stryker and Peter Burke, “The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63:4 (2000): 286.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Chaves, “Rain Dances in the Dry Season: Overcoming the Religious Congruence Fallacy,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49:1 (2010): 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 9.

Religious identity, then, is not a cohesive expression or definition of one's social and sacred values, roles, and actions. Instead, religious identity may transform over time, receive fresh articulation given new situations, or may struggle with or against alternative identities throughout the daily life of the actor. The various understandings of identity offered by those in the situationalist camp necessarily focus on this competition and the presence, or not, of corresponding behaviors. The continuity and stability noted by Bellah and others is empirically invalidated by the myriad of supporting studies offered by these contemporary social scientists.

### **The Ideal as Potential Solution**

Sociological theories, however, frequently employ the term ideal in order to underscore the social foundations of religious beliefs as well as the function of religion in society. In his ideal-society theory, Harold Fallding maintains the veracity of an objective ideal outside of human experience, an "ideal possibility, a potential, within every encounter, relationship and society which constitutes it from the beginning, and which can guide its unfolding and judge it at the end as having realized or forfeited its opportunity."<sup>12</sup> In response to this objective potentiality, humans establish their own life-possibility, or ideal form of existence. Writing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Georg Simmel concurs by describing the social origins of religion in terms of a community's claims and benefits on the one hand and the individual's ethical-social duties on the other; these interact in such a way that a concept of the Absolute is necessarily and naturally posited in order to provide objectivity to both. Thus, "The relations between people...find their substantial and *ideal* expression in the idea of the divine."<sup>13</sup>

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Émile Durkheim similarly asserts that religion expresses a "collective ideal" which is the result of "the school of collective life that the individual has

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<sup>12</sup> Harold Fallding, "Made in the Likeness of God; or, the Religious Realization of Human Identity; or, Religion without Illusion," *Sociological Analysis* 40:2 (1979): 147.

<sup>13</sup> Georg Simmel, *Essays on Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 118. Emphasis added.

learned to idealize.”<sup>14</sup> It should also be noted that Durkheim carefully states, “...it is an arbitrary simplification to see only the idealistic side of religion—in its way, it is realistic.”<sup>15</sup> Religion reflects society, both through abstract idealizations and integrations of reality. This resembles Hans Mol’s observation of a tension between the ultimate meaning offered by religions and the moral codes therein. Succinctly expressed, “The relevance of a moral system lies in its capacity to be concrete rather than eternal. The relevance of a meaning system lies in its capacity to be eternal rather than concrete.”<sup>16</sup> For Mol, this is evidence of the dialectical nature of society and its institutions; there is incessant oscillation between adaptability and stability.<sup>17</sup>

For us, Mol’s statement serves as a window into one possibility for retaining identity as a salient analytical tool. Moral codes and meaning systems are the two sides of the religious coin. The former illuminates the observed incongruence of religious patterns (the failure to achieve the ideal morality) while the latter sheds light on the presence of primordial notions (as myths and rituals reinforce an ideal history and self-definition). If, sociologically speaking, religions are idealizations of social living, then perhaps it is appropriate to view religious identities as idealizations as well. In other words, the relationship between belief and behavior is not one of cause and effect, but they both have the potential to evoke identity because they are both a form of the ideal. The meaning system posits historical continuity; the moral system delineates the congruent from the incongruent as community members enjoy varying degrees of success in abiding by the rules and espoused values of the collective.

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<sup>14</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 318.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 315.

<sup>16</sup> Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred* (New York: Free Press, 1976), 82.

<sup>17</sup> See, *Identity and the Sacred* (New York: Free Press, 1976) for Mol’s book-length explication of a general theory of religion and identity based on a dialectic model.

Identity is not only a nebulous term in everyday parlance; it is an almost insurmountable obstacle in academic study. Though there may be legitimate cause for concern, the notion of identity generally, and religious identity in particular, should not be abandoned. In a sense, we are striving to end the game of tug-of-war between those in the vein of Rudolph Otto or Mircea Eliade and those who eschew interpretation in favor of dry data collection. In striking fashion, the same tension permeates the dichotomous categorizations of identity theories adumbrated by Coleman and Collins. Primordial definitions stem from efforts to capture *emic* conceptions of identity while situational approaches derive from empirical, *etic* studies.

These two categories may be integrated in our view. It is possible to approach religious identity as an ideal put forward by religion. In this sense, it purports to infiltrate the group's values, attitudes, memories, and ethics. It extends historical continuity, stability, and order but leaves room for religious incongruence by persisting as a sacred cloak covering all experiences: moral successes and failure, congruence and inconsistency. Perhaps the question, then, is not whether and to what extent self-identified Muslims (or Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, etc.) act in ways consonant with their religion's beliefs but how they use their religion to interpret both the moments when they do and do not exhibit such congruence. As investigators of religious phenomena, we should remember that identities are invoked separately from any actions performed. With this in mind, it may be easier to see both the import of identity for the believers themselves as well as some of the minutiae of their religious systems.



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